Robert Frost

Dynamics of Human Relationships in Selected Poems of Robert Frost

It is proposed, to study, examine and analyse the dynamics of human relationships in selected poems of Robert Frost. In this study dynamics has been used in the sense "the way in which people or things behave and react to each other in a particular situation." (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, s.v.dynamics1.) Robert Frost is known mainly as a nature poet. Although he describes nature, especially the seasons, time of day, things like stars, flowers and landscape, human beings occupy an important place in his poems. Relationships between individuals and society at large are a significant scene in his poetry.

It is proposed in this study to cover the range and variety of human relationships in his poems, relationships between man and his fellow men, individual's relation to himself, man and woman, woman to woman, friends, employees and employer.

The study will comprise five chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction
Chapter II: Early Poems (1913-16), in his early volumes mainly

a) A Boy's Will (1913)
b) North of Boston (1914)
c) Mountain Interval (1916)

Chapter III: Poems of the Middle Period (1923-36), included in three volumes:

a) New Hampshire (1923)
b) West Running Brook (1928)
c) A Further Range (1936)

Chapter IV: Last Years (1942-62), poems in

a) A Witness Tree (1942)
b) Steeple Bush (1947)
c) In the Clearing (1962)

Chapter V: Conclusion

Chapter I
Introduction

Frost's poems give a memorable impression created by the overwhelming presence of nature. Nature has a deep impact on his people even when they are confined within the four walls of their house. Most of his poems describe nature in vivid detail. In Frost's world, all seasons begin with winter, autumn merely ushering in the mother season. Spring is coloured with winter memories while mid-summer is non-existent. Water and white snow are common features in his poems. However, although nature is predominant in his poems, it serves as a backdrop and not the central theme, for there is always the presence of a human character in his works.

In fact Frost projects man as a social animal, who lives in society due to necessity not personal choice. Since society is an integral part of human existence as described by Frost, man cannot break away from it. He has to abide by certain laws and customs to maintain peace and harmony in community life. The greatest catastrophe imaginable for a man is complete isolation from society.

Frost's poems are full of individuals drawn together by the bonds of love and need. The fear of loneliness is deeply rooted in the human heart, for instance, in "The Fear of Man," one actually visualises a girl setting forth for home at midnight with a heightened pulse. Similarly, Old Silas in "The Death of the Hired Man" crawls back like a wounded dog to his den in the last moments of his life seeking a sense of security around loved ones. "The Housekeeper" portrays the story of John and Estelle in a live-in relationship for fifteen years, where Estelle breaks away and elopes with a man who had promised marriage to her. Although her former relationship was satisfying, she wanted society to accord legal status to her relationship. The need based argument is further strengthened in "A Hundred Collars," where the need to rest overcomes the fear of the unfamiliar.

Frost's men are constantly afraid of being alone, as seen in "Old Man's Winter Night". "The Fear" recalls the apprehensions of a woman haunted by her

husband's trust that she broke while eloping with another man. She lived in constant fear of being followed, spied upon by her husband in order to retaliate.

Chapter II
Early Poems (1913-16)

The relationships between Frost's characters vary from poem to poem. There are poems that reflect male chauvinism at its best. "Mounting until she cowered under him" (l. 11) and the last line where Amy's husband tells her "I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will! – " 'Home Burial' reflects the threat and dominance of the husband. Similarly, in"Servant to Servants", "Mind you, I waited till Len said the word/ I didn't want the blame if things went wrong" (l. 149). The woman is scared of her husband and cannot challenge his authority. "Unless Len took the notion, which he won't / And I won't ask him- it's not sure enough/ I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going" (l. 157) talks of a servile, insecure and helpless attitude. The very authenticity of marriage is scorned when she talks of her mother's marriage to her father. "…..and mother came / a bride, to help take care of such a creature,/ And accommodate her young life to his."(ll. 126-128) shows the petite condition of women in society.

The story of this woman is very much like Rose Terry Cooke's "Mrs Flint's Married Experience," where the woman has no voice of her own. She works throughout the day, is half fed, lonely but still uncomplaining. She is always surrounded by men like the wife in "Servant to Servants," controlled by them and their demands. Deacon Flint ate the best portions of food and left the remains for his servile wife to starve. The hired men in "Servant to Servants" devoured the wife's labour and energies along with her food. In "The Impulse," a feeling of barrenness and emptiness drives the woman to unleash herself and run away, never to come back. She hid when her husband called out to her for fear of being trapped again into a life that was suffocating her.

One gets to see a very different perspective in "The Death of the Hired Man," which was written at about the same time. Warren and Mary share a very healthy

relationship, they understand and respect each other's feelings: "She drew him down/ To sit beside her on the wooden steps" (ll. 9-10). Warren agrees when she insists in forgiving Silas and accepting him. In "West Running Brook," the harmony between the couple is defined when she talks of the symbolic brook that it "Can trust itself to go by contraries/ The way I can with you – and you with me" (ll. 9-10).

Sometimes we also witness flashes of indifference in the attitude of man for his fellowmen. For instance, in "Out Out," "They listened at his heart/ Little-Less-nothing! And that ended it/ And they, since they/ were not the one dead, turned to their affairs." (ll. 31-34). Though these lines seem ruthless, this is Frost's way of dealing with grief, plunging back into the daily affairs of life. In "Home Burial," the wife remarks that most people make only a pretence of following their loved one to the grave, when in truth their minds are "making the best of their way back to life/ and living people and things they understand" (ll. 107-108). In "Servant to Servants," there is an example of the wife's uncle who was locked up and treated in an inhuman, beastly manner. The brutality of relatives who pose to be the closest is unmasked. "They found a way to put a stop to it" refers to the brutality to the near and dear one in a very subtle yet open manner (l. 139).

A sheer picture of barbarism is portrayed in "The Vanishing Red," when the Miller laughed:

> He took him down below a cramping rafter,
> And showed him, through a manhole in the floor,
> The water in desperate straits like frantic fish,
> Salmon and Sturgeon, lashing with their tails.
> Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it.
>
> (ll. 20-24).

At the same time, "In the Tuft of Flowers," when the speaker sees a butterfly that leads his eyes to a tuft of flowers that the mower had left standing, his loneliness vanishes. The joy that the mower must have felt on seeing the tuft of flowers was transferred to the speaker. This awakens the feeling of brotherhood with the

mower. He felt he was working side by side with the mower, “Men work together, I told him from the heart’/ whether they work together or apart” (ll.39-40).

“Birches” symbolises the different mood swings and dilemmas that we face in life. The depression that sometimes leads one to quit, relinquish everything, but the very next moment one wishes to come back “I’d like to get away from the earth awhile, / And then come back to it and begin over.... Earth’s the right place for love” (l. 48-52)

Chapter III
Poems of the Middle Period (1923-36)

Frost has a very subtle way of saying things. Nowhere is he didactic. He makes a statement and lets the readers decide for themselves. In “Provide Provide,” it is apparent that in order to age gracefully and live a regal life, one ought to provide for one’s future. “Better to go down dignified/ With boughten friendship by your side” (l.27). This also reminds us of Frost’s last days. This was the kind of end that he had envisaged and he got it. In “Out Out”, “------big boy / doing a man’s work, though a child at heart” (ll. 23-24) a very subtle protest against child labour.

In “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,” there is a tussle between the beauty and attraction of the wood and the pull of larger responsibilities outside the woods. The village symbolises society, civilization, duty, sensibility and responsibility whereas the woods represent wilderness and everything beyond the border of the village. The last two lines of this poem “And miles to go before I sleep/ And miles to go before I sleep”, here the first line stays within the literal boundaries set forth by the rest of the poem while the next line reminds us of the approaching death and the little time that we have at hand.

Unbounded love, loyalty and self sacrifice of the fairer sex towards her better half is one thing that touches the heart of his readers. In “Not to Keep”, “They gave him back to her alive / They had given him back to her, but not to keep” (l.23), a poem that stimulates one’s emotions and makes one aware of the great sacrifice

a soldier makes in order to guard our frontiers. It is not only him, but all salute to his spouse for her dedication, commitment and selfless love that she showers without a word of complaint. This is also seen in “Servant to Servants,” where the wife ignores her husband’s shortcomings by saying, “It’s not that Len don’t want the best for me” (l. 60). There is undaunted loyalty, she does not wish to blame her husband, and she defends him when she says, “His work’s a man’s, of course, from sun to sun” (l. 66).

Frost is known for crafting aphorisms in his poetry. A live example can be seen in ‘Fire and Ice’, where the poet has conveyed in few lines about the lust for desire and mutual hatred that can perish the world several times. In “Mowing,” the gist of life is truly conveyed “the fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows” (l. 13). The ambiguity that the speaker undergoes between avocation and vocation in “Two Tramps in a Mud Time” and then realises the truth of life:

> As my two eyes make one in sight.
> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future’s sakes.
>
> (ll.68-72)

This supports Darwin’s theory “survival of the fittest.” This is further strengthened in “Departmental,” that talks of people’s obsession for themselves. The last two lines say it all, “It couldn’t be called ungentle/ But how thoroughly departmental” (ll.42-43). The death of the ant has no effect on any one. The moth was the least surprised, he went his way. The ants also, considered as the curious race, seeing the body of one of their dead, reported to the other with whom he crosses antennae and this report was carried higher up till this message reached Janizary, whose office is to bury. He seized the dead by the middle, raising it high in the air, carried it out with no one to stand and stare as if it was nobody’s affair.

A picture of darkness, depression and dejection overpowers many of his poems, “Acquainted with the Night” being one of them. One is drawn in a sombre mood,

can foresee and experience one's own life in old age and reciprocate to the overpowering sky that proclaims that the time is apt.

Chapter IV
Last Years (1942-62)

"The land was ours before we were the lands" (l. 1). This immortal line of Frost in 'The Gift Outright' portray him to be a true nationalist. By this total gift to themselves, by their surrender to the land, the people of America acquired a new identity that of a free American nation. He claimed that before being international, one should be national, have an obsession for one's own nation.
Frost was fearless in his criticism, may it be the American government or the Russian Government. He strongly criticised the Russian government when the communists objected to Boris Pasternak receiving the Nobel Prize in literature for *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak's criticism of Soviet repression, Frost believed, was the way of showing love for his nation. Frost recited "Mending Wall" to an audience in Moscow during his visit to the U.S.S.R.

There is an impression of ambivalence in his poems on account of his use of point and counter point. Use of point and counter point may be considered a peculiarly individual technique of the poet Frost. This can be seen in almost all his poems. The woods are lovely and dark and deep, but the speaker has miles to go before he goes to sleep. The speaker in "Birches" would like to escape to heaven from the cobwebs and stings of the forest of experiences on earth, but he would like to come down because the earth is the best place for love. The neighbour in "Mending Wall" believes that good fences make good neighbours but before the speaker builds a wall he would like to know what he is walling in, or walling out. This is seen clearly in "U.S. 1946 King's X," where clearly in his verses on the bomb following the atomic blasts over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, he, on one side supports their use as means of victory whereas on the other hand talks of their banishment on humanitarian grounds. "In One Step Backward Taken," he talks of the ruthlessness and barbarism of nature and suddenly he switches on to the stopping of the rain and the storm and life getting back to normal.

Chapter V
Conclusion

Fear of loneliness, isolation and darkness always trouble Frost. Flashes of these are seen in many of his poems. The apprehensions that he faced had a lot to do with his childhood memories, the misfortune faced on losing his children one after the other, the premature death of his wife, the loss of his mother who was very close to him, his sister Jeannie who was insane and institutionalised.

His early poems feature speakers who choose solitude in order to know about themselves but ultimately they discover a firm connection to the world around them as in "Mending Wall." The speaker does not care for walls, when he asks his neighbour, why he would have a wall where it is not needed. His neighbour replies "Good fences make good neighbours" (l. 27). When one talks of pulling the wall down, it clearly reflects he has a heart and is sensitive to feelings of brotherhood.

Frost does not believe in International brotherhood but is a diehard nationalist. Frost believed that an individual's natural relationship to society extended to his family, close friends, then home town or local community, his state and finally his country.

In March 1950, on his seventy fifth birthday, on being asked at a press conference what he wanted for his birthday, his reply was, "I want prowess for my country, and by this I mean, the native ability to help in everything its people attempt". Nine years later when he was asked what he wanted for the world and his country, the poet replied, "for the world, 'no', I'm not large enough for that, for my country, 'yes', I want it to win at every turn in everything it does. I am a terrible Nationalist". When someone charged him of being dubious regarding his International good will, his reply was, "I am a nationalist and I expect others to be." This applied to his view of his country throughout his life.

Robert Frost

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